

Amendments to the Claims:

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) An apparatus for automatically stuffing a tubular food casing with food product, the apparatus comprising:
  - a stuffing horn through which food product flows into a tubular food casing ~~deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn~~, the stuffing horn including an input end interconnected with a pressurized source of food product;
  - a clipping device for closing with a clip the food casing after being stuffed, the clipping device comprising a slot for guiding the clip and an entry into the slot, wherein the entry comprises an aperture in the clipping device; and
  - a tape holding lengths of flexible string having end portions secured together to form flexible string loops, and  
a source of compressed gas adapted to direct a flow of gas onto a string loop, the tape being directed toward the clipping device and the compressed gas impinging on the string loop so that a the string loop is transferred into the entry and into the slot in the clipping device so that a first portion of the string loop protrudes through the entry into the slot while a second portion of the string loop is held simultaneously to the tape,
  - wherein the entry is positioned in the slot and the tape is positioned relative to the entry so that when the food casing is being closed with the clip, the clip draws the loop to the casing and holds the ~~end portions of the~~ loop between the clip and the food.
2. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising a plurality of rolls including a tape supply roll, a drive roll, a takeup roll and at least one intermediate roll which is proximate the entry so that the secured together end portions of a string loop project from the tape into the entry into the slot as the tape passes around the intermediate roll.

3. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 2 comprising means for driving the drive roll to pull the tape from the supply roll around the intermediate roll.

4. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 3 comprising an edge for catching secured together end portions of a string loop as the string loop passes around the intermediate roll to cause the secured together portions of the string to protrude from the tape into the entry to the slot and to assist in removal of the string loop from the tape.

5. (Canceled)

5 ~~6~~. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the secured together portions are secured together by a knot.

7. (Canceled)

6 ~~8~~. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 comprising means for radially compressing the food casing after being stuffed to cause a restricted location along a stuffed food casing length, said clipping device being configured to clip the casing at the restricted location.

9-12. (Canceled)

7 ~~13~~. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the clipping device is of sufficiently light weight and is driven by a sufficient power source to obtain a clipping cycle time of less than 3 seconds.

8 ~~14~~. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein a conveyor is provided to remove stuffed food product from the vicinity of the clipping device after a stuffed food casing is closed, said conveyor comprising:

a conveying belt defining a conveying surface having a variable length; and

one or more movable slacker idler rollers over which the conveying belt travels, wherein the one or more slacker idler rollers are movable to, permit the length of the conveying surface to be extended and retracted, the idle rollers adapted such that a space between the clipping device and the conveying surface may be enlarged and reduced by retracting and extending the conveying surface length.

918. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of claim <sup>8</sup>14 comprising:

gatherers to gather a stuffed food casing to form a radial restriction in the stuffed food casing; and

a conveyor drive cylinder to cause the conveyor conveying surface length to retract to increase the space when the gatherers are operating and to cause the conveying surface length extend to reduce the space and place the conveying surface near the clipping device when the gatherers are dormant.

16-24. (Canceled)

1325. (Currently Amended) A method for automatically stuffing tubular food casing with food product comprising:

passing food product through a stuffing horn into a tubular food casing ~~deshirred from a shirred food casing stick on the stuffing horn~~ where an input end of the stuffing horn is interconnected with a pressurized source of food product;

after the food casing is stuffed, closing the food casing with a clip using a clipping device; and

transferring a flexible string loop from a tape into an entry to a slot in the clipping device so that when the food casing is closed with the clip, the clip draws the loop to the casing and holds the string loop to the food casing at two or more points along the string loop, wherein the string loop includes a knot and during the transfer of the string loop, a first portion of the string loop including the knot protrudes through the entry into the slot while a second portion of the string loop is held simultaneously to the tape.

26-27. (Canceled)

<sup>13</sup>  
~~14~~<sup>28</sup>. (Previously Presented) The method of claim ~~25~~<sup>13</sup> comprising causing secured together end portions of a string loop as it passes around an edge to protrude from the tape into the entry to the slot and to assist in removal of the string loop from the tape.

<sup>13</sup>  
~~15~~<sup>29</sup>. (Currently Amended) The method of claim ~~25~~<sup>13</sup> comprising blowing the secured together end portions of the string loop into the entry to the ~~channel slot~~ using ~~an air source a~~ gas; and capturing ~~both end~~ two or more portions of the string loop between the clip end and the casing.

30-41. (Canceled)

~~10~~<sup>42</sup>. (New) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the compressed gas is air.

~~11~~<sup>43</sup>. (New) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the clip holds the loop to the food casing at two or more points along the loop.

~~12~~<sup>44</sup>. (New) The apparatus of claim 1 wherein end portions of the lengths of string have been secured together in knots to form string loops and wherein the first portion of the string loop that protrudes through the entry into the slot comprises a knot.

<sup>15</sup>  
~~16~~<sup>45</sup>. (New) The method of claim ~~29~~<sup>15</sup> wherein the gas is air.